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Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *AMERICAN NIETZSCHE A History of an Icon and His Ideas* Chicago: U of Chicago, 2012.

Yonghwa Lee

(Incheon National University)

It is a common place among scholars that ever since Walter Kaufmann's seminal study of Friedrich Nietzsche with his authoritative and nuanced translation of the German philosopher's works in 1950s, Nietzsche has established himself as one of the most popular and influential philosophers in America. With the growing dominance of antifoundationalism (the denials of universal truth) for the next few decades, Nietzsche has become perhaps the best-known and most often quoted thinker in American culture. Not surprisingly, a great number of American intellectuals have professed themselves to become practitioners of a branch of the Nietzschean philosophy by drawing on groundbreaking concepts and thought-provoking terminologies conceived by Nietzsche in their effort to define and revise various literary and philosophical theories such as postmodernism, deconstruction, and new historicism. Given the provocative and invigorating insights

Nietzsche offers into every element of Western civilization and its fundamental premises--the genealogy of morals, re-evaluation of values, the death of God, the interpretive nature of all thoughts and belief--it seems only natural that American intellectual community never ceases to engage itself with the challenges put forward by Nietzsche's thoughts.

What goes often unnoticed in the critical assessment of Nietzsche's reception in America is the fact that immediately his thoughts were introduced to this country in the 1890s, they provided insights and inspiration for a wide range of American audiences. In 1915, astonished by "the bewitching power" of Nietzsche's relentless assault on the institutional Christianity, one prominent minister writing for *Bibliotheca Sacra* went so far as to make an earnest confession that "No one can think, and escape Nietzsche" (74). The implication is quite clear: the Nietzsche vogue in contemporary America is anything but new, and Nietzsche's philosophy has continued to help Americans understand and (re)define the foundations of modern American life of the last two centuries.

Ratner-Rosenhagen's *American Nietzsche* is a book that traces the dynamic interaction between Nietzsche's philosophy and modern American thought. In her discussion of Nietzsche's "crucial role in the ever-dynamic remaking of modern American thought" (27), Ratner-Rosenhagen focuses on how "confrontations with Nietzsche laid bare a fundamental concern driving modern American thought: namely, the question of the grounds, or foundations, for modern American thought and culture itself" (23). In her attempt to demonstrate America's ironic rediscovery of their homemade philosophy--one of her central

claims being the presence of remarkable affinities between Emerson's and Nietzsche's thoughts--in Nietzsche, Ratner-Rosenhagen begins her exquisitely written book by describing the moment of Nietzsche's exaltation when as a seventeen year old student he read Ralph Waldo Emerson. Recognizing great affinity between his thought and Emerson's, Nietzsche never parted with Emerson throughout his life and confessed "I shouldn't praise it, it is too close to me" (20). After this intriguing prologue, the first half of the book examines the way in which Americans responded to Nietzsche until 1930. This is followed by a chapter devoted to Kaufmann's restoration of Nietzsche from his undeserved infamy (or obscurity) starting in the 1950s. The following chapter discusses three "anti-foundationalist" readings of Nietzsche: Harold Bloom's, Richard Rorty's, and Stanley Cavell's. The book closes with an epilogue which discusses Allan Bloom's critique of left-wing professors' abuse of Nietzsche's value relativism in his 1987 best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*.

In the four chapters Ratner-Rosenhagen explores Americans' reaction to Nietzsche until 1930. Drawing extensively on rather obscure sources, Ratner-Rosenhagen demonstrates that most early American readers of Nietzsche who read Nietzsche's works in English translation participated in the "Nietzsche vogue" and took him as an antidote to "American commercialism, provincialism, and anti-intellectualism" (45). To these American cosmopolitans--radicals and conservatives alike--Nietzsche's philosophy represented all that was modern in thought or the *Zeitgeist*. Ratner-Rosenhagen then moves onto her investigation of another, but quite unlikely, group of people who exhibited great interest in Nietzsche's thoughts: religious commentators. With Nietzsche's

influence in American life rapidly growing, religious leaders (both Protestant and Catholic), who felt the escalating tension between traditional religious faith and secular knowledge, were forced to grapple with what should be the reaction of Christianity to Nietzsche. Ratner-Rosenhagen insightfully argues that even as they attempted to reject the moral and religious implications of Nietzsche's subversive claims--that "God is dead" and Christian cosmology itself was the product of human imagination for a utilitarian purpose rather than of divine origins--these serious-minded men of cloth had to accept Nietzsche's assertion that the true test of religion was "the human beings it produces, as well as the social arrangements it informs" (89). Paradoxically, therefore, even when they wrestled with Nietzsche to make him "safe for Christianity," they contributed to investing Nietzsche "with a spiritual authority that could rival Jesus" (101).

According to Ratner-Rosenhagen, Nietzsche's thoughts continued to find entry to American moral and aesthetic imagination in the years up to and during World War I primarily through the eclectic groups of aspiring young Americans who confessed their fatal encounter with Nietzsche. Isadora Duncan remarked that "Nietzsche's philosophy ravished my being" (149). Adopting spiritual terms, Jack London and Eugene O'Neill referred to Nietzsche as "their 'Christ' and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as their 'Bible'" (149). For playwrights, novelists, and poets like George Cram Cook, Upton Sinclair, and Kahlil Gibran, Nietzsche served as a teacher who could enlighten them about the role of a sovereign individual after the rejection of the traditional notion of God.

Ratner-Rosenhagen then turns her attention to the rapid decline of

Americans' interest in "the Übermensch's potential for advancing the progress of human race" (125) with the start of World War I. While the war itself was labeled as "Euro-Nietzschean War" (137) by the British press, the wartime observers like George Santayana pictured the Übermensch as the manifestation of a German idealistic egotism and attributed German militarism and imperialism to Nietzsche's views expressed in such terms as blond beasts and master race. Despite the efforts of a few devoted adherents of Nietzsche to restore his proper place in modern American thought, the antagonistic sentiment of the Anglo-American readers toward his philosophy became prevalent. Nietzsche's reputation seemed permanently damaged with the outbreak of World War II when Hitler and Mussolini joined to appropriate the highly charged language of Nietzsche's philosophy--beyond good and evil, and master morality vs. slave morality, for instance--to justify the causes of the war as a sort of their manifest destiny to reassert their legitimate power as a master race.

In her chapter on Kaufmann's role in redeeming Nietzsche's reputation in America, Ratner-Rosenhagen investigates Kaufmann's admirable project of persuading the postwar American reading public to re-evaluate Nietzsche in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. One of Kaufmann's major contributions is to salvage Nietzsche from the dominant view of Nietzsche as the mastermind of the Nazis by demonstrating Nietzsche's concept of "will to power" is not so much a political agenda as an expression of a desire for individual perfection. Kaufmann's another contribution, according to Ratner-Rosenhagen, is to present Nietzsche not as a "system-thinker" interested in "logic games or his desire for a metaphysical map of the universe" but as a

“problem-thinker” who deemed worthy of consideration “[o]nly those problems which grow out of real experience” (236). That is to say, whereas a “system-thinker” is invested mainly in metaphysics and idealism, a “problem-thinker” grapples with moral and psychological implications of human existence. This distinction between a system-thinker and a problem-thinker is at the heart of Kaufmann’s attempt to re-evaluate Nietzsche as a philosopher capable of addressing both Anglo-American (analytic) and Continental (existential) thoughts in midcentury America. On the one hand, Nietzsche evinces affinity to analytic philosophers such as James and Dewey in rejecting metaphysics and embracing empiricism particularly through his attention to the uses of language. On the other hand, Nietzsche exhibits kinship to existential philosophers by blending philosophy and psychology in his examination of the implications of the death of God for modern society.

Ratner-Rosenhagen concludes with a discussion of three American Nietzsches constructed by Harold Bloom, Richard Rorty, and Stanley Cavell. While Rorty draws on Nietzsche to examine full implications of pragmatist antifoundationalism without connecting him to Emerson, Bloom and Cavell unravel the similarities between Nietzsche and Emerson who, they thought, is not a facile optimist but a philosopher that looks forward to postmodern Continental thought. Whether they attempt to bring back Emerson to the discussion of Nietzsche or not, these antifoundationalists who deny the ground for the universal truth on American native grounds “used Nietzsche to come to terms with American thinking in relation to European thought” (304). Specifically, for these antifoundationalists, Nietzsche is an effective figure for

considering both the possibilities and problems of American thinking that seeks to construct meaning without recourse to the first cause, necessity, or foundation. Nietzsche offered sweeping assault on the belief in metaphysical and moral foundationalism, but like Emerson, Nietzsche believed that despite the fictive nature of our views of truth, language, and the self, they are still useful in exploring “new avenues of discovery, new sources of wonder” (304).

This book complements *Nietzsche in American Literature and Thought* (edited by Manfred Pütz) which features a collection of interdisciplinary essays on the philosophical influences of Nietzsche’s thoughts on American literary men and thinkers. Although Ratner-Rosenhagen’s approach does not offer an in-depth analysis of how such critical issues as perspectivism, the problem of language, and religious imagination, her book can direct interested readers to relevant articles and other literature cited in it for more detailed information about these issues. Based on her extensive research of all sorts of sources available--books, magazines, diaries, journals, correspondents from 1880s to the late-twentieth century--Ratner-Rosenhagen’s book exhibits remarkable vigor and eloquence in tracing the dynamic history of Americans’ engagement with Nietzsche’s thought. Her analysis of Nietzsche’s thus constructed by different generations of Americans is further enhanced by her equally impressive and thoroughgoing reading of Nietzsche’s own works. Ratner-Rosenhagen’s examination of antifoundationalists’ use of Nietzsche is particularly illuminating in critiquing recent reception of Nietzsche’s thought by his postmodern disciples in American academia. Such prominent postmodern thinkers as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Judith

Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have correctly understood the deconstructive elements of Nietzsche's philosophy, but they fail to see its redemptive or reconstructive power in a world without the foundations. The book thus offers a comprehensive and perceptive view of the ongoing interaction between Americans and Nietzsche about metaphysical and moral foundations of human existence, but it stops short of providing an in-depth discussion of Nietzsche generated by a single critic or each generation. For one, Ratner-Rosenthal's largely informative chapters merely record the excitement of American writers like Jack London or Eugene O'Neill upon their discovery of Nietzsche without making any specific argument about the German philosopher's influences on their literary works. To do justice to the book, however, one needs to consider its scope and methods as intellectual history. As such, the book paves a way for students of various disciplines including philosophy, literature, history, and cultural studies. *American Nietzsche* is an admirable achievement not only in Nietzsche studies but also in American intellectual history.

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Abstract

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Yonghwa Lee

(Incheon National University)

This review introduces Ratner-Rosenhagen's *American Nietzsche*, a book which traces the dynamic interaction between Nietzsche's philosophy and modern American thought. Ratner-Rosenhagen begins her book by pointing out remarkable affinities between Emerson's and Nietzsche's thoughts in her prologue. After the prologue about the presence of Emerson's thought in Nietzsche's philosophy, the first half of the book examines the way in which Americans responded to Nietzsche until 1930. This is followed by a chapter devoted to Kaufmann's restoration of Nietzsche from his underserved infamy (or obscurity) starting in the 1950s. The following chapter discusses three "anti-foundationalist" readings of Nietzsche: Harold Bloom's, Richard Rorty's, and Stanley Cavell's. The book closes with an epilogue which discusses Allan Bloom's critique of left-wing professors' abuse of Nietzsche's value relativism in his 1987 best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. This book complements *Nietzsche in American Literature and Thought* (edited by Manfred Pütz) which features a collection of interdisciplinary essays on the philosophical influences of Nietzsche's thoughts on American literary men and thinkers. Although Ratner-Rosenhagen's approach does not offer an in-depth analysis of how such critical issues as perspectivism, the problem of language, and religious imagination, the book paves a way for students of various disciplines including philosophy, literature, history, and cultural studies. *American Nietzsche* is an admirable achievement not only in Nietzsche studies but also

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Key Words

Nietzsche, America, Emerson, antifoundationalism